THE MYSTICISM OF ABŪ YAZĪD AL-BISṬĀMĪ

By:
Mohd Fakhrudin Abdul Mukti

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahaskan pemikiran tasawuf Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī. Konsep al-fanā' yang dihayati oleh beliau dalam usaha menghampirkan diri kepada Allah s.w.t. telah menghasilkan suatu implikasi yang penuh dengan tanda tanya terutama kata-kata ganjil dan kontroversi yang terhembur dari bibirnya. Artikel ini juga meninjau sejauh mana pengaruh pemikiran mistik Hinduisme dalam tasawuf al-Bisṭāmī atau sekurang-kurangnya persamaan-persamaan di antara keduanya.

Introduction

The origins of the Sufi movement are attributed in great measure to the role played by the earliest Sufis of the Islamic era, the '*tābi'īn*' (the followers of the Prophet). Many later Sufis could not avoid recognizing the influence of these early masters when experiencing this kind of mystical life as a manifestation of their understanding or interpretation of Islamic teachings based on the Qur'an and the Traditions, the practical life of the Prophet himself, and of his close companions. If one examines the teachings of the later Sufis in comparison with those of the earliest Sufis, one finds the roots of the latter in these teachings.

Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 261 A.H. or 264/874 or 877 A.D.)

was regarded by Abū Nasr al-Sarrāj (d. 380 A.H) as one of the prominent earliest Sūfī masters ever known. Abū Yazīd's ideas influenced many Sufis after him, such as al-Junayd (d. 291 A.H/910 A.D), al-Shiblī (d. 334 A.H/945 A.D) and al-Ḥallāj (d. 309 A.H/921A.D). They commented his ideas and introduced some new concepts, particularly with regard to renunciation *(zuhd)*, intoxication *(sukr)* and annihilation *(fanā')*.

Abū Yazīd is considered as the Sufi who really underwent the mystical life that looked so strange not only to the non-Sufis but also to some of *'ulamā'* during and after his time. Some of the latter *'ulamā'* even accused him of being an infidel because of his theopetic utterances known as *shaṭaḥāt*. It is very difficult for the common Muslim to understand his utterances. Yet we cannot understand his teachings without understanding the words spoken by him. In other words, we have to understand his *shaṭaḥāt* and the nature of the languages he used, especially Arabic. Unfortunately we no longer have access to his original articles or books written by his hand.

Al-Sarrāj agreed with al-Junayd in defending Abū Yazīd's sayings and ideas. They respected him as a Sufi who had his own understanding of the Islamic teachings through the Qur'an and the Traditions.

On the other hand, many scholars say that the *shaṭaḥāt*s are originally rooted in foreign sources, especially in Hinduism from which his teacher converted to Islam. There are many similarities of the words they used and the concepts they tried to introduce.

1. Abū Yazīd's Life and Personality

His full name was Abū Yazīd Tayfūr ibn 'Isā ibn Surushān. He was also known as Bayazid. He was born at Bisṭām, in the province of Kumis, in Northeastern Iran, in the west Khurasān. He spent the latter part of his life in his village and died there in 261 A.H/874 A.D or 264 A.H/877-8 A.D.[1] But according to Sahlaji

[1] See *The Encyclopeadia of Religion* Vol. 2 (New York: Mac Millan Publishing Company, 1960), p. 162.

[2] Abdul Haqq Ansārī, in *Hamdard Islamicus* Vol. 6, 1983, p. 26.

(d. 476 A.H/984 A.D), he died in 234 A.H/847 A.D at the age of seventy three. That means he was born in 161 A.H/777 A.D.[2]

When he was ten years old, Abū Yazīd left his village and began moving from place to place over a period of thirty years in order to seek knowledge and to discipline himself in the ways of the Sufi masters of that time. When he was forty years old he came back to his village and began living as a mystical Sufi, teaching those disciples who sought him out to gain knowledge and educate themselves. During this time he reportedly corresponded with several Sufis. Among them were Abū Mūsā al-Daybūlī, Aḥmad ibn Khadruyah Yaḥyā al-Rāzī, and Dhū Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 861 A.D.). It was said that they also contacted him through correspondence and some of them also visited him at his house.[3] Unfortunately, we cannot find further information on what they discussed through such activities.

As a religious man and an 'ascetic Sufi', Abū Yazīd spent all his time worshipping God by practicing the religious teachings and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca. For his full-time devotion to God, he reportedly asked God to relieve him of food and woman. Hence, it was said that he never got married in his life. Sahlaji even does not mention whether he did so or not. Because of his full-time worshipping, he probably did not want to have much to do with his wife - if he got married.[4] Otherwise, al-Iṣfahānī told us

[3] *The Encyclopeadia of Religion, op. cit.*, p. 162.

[4] Anṣārī, *op. cit.*, p. 27. Many Sufis were known to have been celibates such as Rābi'ah al-Adawiyyah (d. 181 A.H.), and Ibrahīm ibn Adham (d. 160 A.H.). For them, marriage might prevent them from full time devoting to God. Al-Ghazālī, however, sees the marriage as a personal choice to activate one's spiritual life and inner peace. If someone feels that, by celibacy, is more able to serve his spiritual life in drawing closer to God, he has a right to be a celibate. One of Sufis, Bishr al-Ḥāfī (d. 227 A.H.) says that he has a duty to obey God's commandments and make it impossible to him to follow the Prophet's Sunna. See: Tor Andrae, *In The Garden of Myrtles* trans. Birgitta Sharpe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 46-47. However, it is different between the Muslim, Hindu and Christians ascetics who are commanded to be celebate and lead a monastic life. See Syed Naguib al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sūfism* (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute Ltd, 1963), p. 5.

that Abū Yazīd's wife narrated something to Abū Ḥassan al-Māzūrī.[5] It means here that he had a wife.

Abū Yazīd chose to live in poverty and hunger. He related hunger with dependance on God because hunger can make someone aware of his weakness. He indicated his conviction of the value of hunger by saying, "If Pharaoh *(Fir'aun)* had been hungry, he would not have said, "I am your Supreme Lord (*ana rabbukum al-a'lā*)" and also that if Korah *(Qārūn)* had been hungry, "he would not have been rebellious" (al-Nāzi'āt (79): 24).[6]

There are many other famous sayings from the Sufis about the virtues of hunger and fasting. To most of them, having food is just to preserve life. Sahl b. Abd Allāh at-Tustarī (d. 283 A.H.), who was famous for his fasts, said, "Food should be eaten only to preserve life and reason, not to give strength, and that incapacity to perform one's devotions through weakness arising from want of food was better than the performance of them by one who had eaten his fill".[7] They also said that hunger is a prison for Satan and that satiation (fullness) is his weapon. Ibn Sahl had the view that satiation is one of "the four enemies" to a man. The others are the world (*ad-dunyā*), inclination *(al-hawā)* and the soul *(al-nafs)*.[8]

In order to attain knowledge of God, Abū Yazīd used a "hungry belly and a naked body".[9] He distributed food and everything he possessed to the poor and needy. He did not own anything, and also refused to use comfortable things. It was said that he refused to receive a pillow sent to him by Dhū Nūn al-Miṣrī. He had only the shirt that covered his body, and even that shirt was returned by

---

[5] Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Hilyat al-Awliyā' Wa Tabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā'* Vol. 10 (Beirūt: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1967), p. 36.

[6] Ali bin Uthmān Al-Hujwirī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, Trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (New Delhi: Taj Company, 1991), pp. 349-350.

[7] James Hastings, *The Encylopaedia of Religion and Ethnics* Vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), pp. 102-103.

[8] Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad 'Ajībah al-Ḥasani, *Īqāẓ al-Himam fī Sharḥ al-Ḥikam* (Cairo: Maṭba'ah Muṣtafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, n.d.), p. 403.

[9] M.A. Hastings and D.D. James, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

its borrower to him after his death.[10]

Abū Yazīd chose to live in this way because of his understanding of the verses of the Qur'an which characterised the worldly life *(al-ḥayāt al-dunyā)* as a game (*lā'ibun*), an entertainment (*lahwun*) and a decoration (*zīnatun*). The Qur'an also says that the worldly life is definitely a "deceitful enjoyment" (*matā'ul ghurūr*). A similar disregard for the material can be found in the lives of many scholars. By the modern standard that kind of life might be seen as rigid and conservative and at least it would be unpopular and out-of-date.

2 Self-mortification and Seeking Knowledge

Abū Yazīd described his self-mortification (*mujahadat al-nafs*) and the results he gained through it. He said:

> For thirty years I was active in self-mortification and I found nothing harder than to learn knowledge (*al-'ilm*) and follow its precepts. And even if there were no different views among the scholars *('ulamā')* I would be tired. The disagreement of the scholars is a mercy except in the term of Oneness (*tawhīd*).[11]

This tells us that Abū Yazīd recognises the difficulty of seeking knowledge compared to undergoing self-mortification in which he experienced so many years. Instead, he was not worried in performing devotions and rituals (*'ibādāt)* and ignored seeking knowledge so far because what he did was in favour of the ideas of some *'ulamā'*.[12] Generally speaking, that to be a worshipper was easier than to be an *'ulamā'*.

In this way, Abū Yazīd spent his time to study many things until he was not only regarded as a Sufi but also as a theologian, philosopher and poet.[13] However, his works on the matters remain

[10] Anṣārī, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

[11] Al-Iṣfahānī, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

[12] In fact, there is 'no monasticism in Islam*(lā rahbāniyyah fī al-Islām)*. See Muḥammad al-Ghazali, *Kayfa Nata'āmal Ma'a al-Qur'ān* (Virginia: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991), p. 48.

[13] Al-Aṭṭās, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

unknown and al-Attas seems to consider him as such without explaining his contribution on the matter. On the other hand, Abū Yazīd was very concerned about obeying the *Sharī'ah* Law and was very kind to his neighbours and to all people. This statement can be supported when he said, "I have agreed to burn myself in Hell in place of the people in order to save them".[14] He also was reported to be very humble and said to have never undermined anybody. He is reputed to have said that everyone who thinks others are worse than he is an egotist *(mutakabbir)*. He reminded his disciples constantly that evil also grows from inside the body. In fact, the Prophet (peace be upon him) often said that there is a piece of meat inside the body of a human being. If it is good the entire body will be good and if it is bad the entire body will be bad. That is the heart (*al-qalb*).

The problem had gained attention of the Sufis over the centuries. One of the scholars, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.505 A.H/1111 A.D), devoted his life to discuss extensively "the diseases of the heart" (*amrād al-qulūb*) as far his famous book "*Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*" is concerned. Finally he concluded that 'Sufism' was the only way bringing to the truth and reality *(al-ḥaqq wa al-ḥaqīqah)*. In contrast to al-Ghazālī, Abū Yazīd involved in Sufism from the very beginning of his life.

3 The Secret Utterances of Abū Yazīd *(Shaṭaḥāt)*

As stated, Abū Yazīd had many *shaṭahāt* in his mystical life. According to al-Sarraj, "*shaṭḥ*" in Arabic is a characteristic of those who have reached the end of self-will (which is the beginning of the state of perfection) and are advancing towards the goal, but have not yet attained it.[15] It is like a narrow river as its water has overflowed over its banks. An ascetic man who overflows with the feeling of ultimate love towards God in his heart and unable to keep it in, just tries to express in such words as he can.[16] Of

[14] Anṣārī, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[15] Al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma'*, ed. Reynold Allegne Nicholson (London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1963), p. 101.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 287.

course, the utterances of this kind would be easily misunderstood by the common Muslims, who do not experience with such mystical feelings. The Sufis spoke these words in a state of intoxication (*sukr*) and annihilation *(fanā')* and were seeking to describe a *wajd* (affective experience) which sets in with force, throws the mystic into excitement, and overpowers him. "It is a language by which one expresses a *wajd* that flows from its source and carries a claim. The claimant has lost his reason, but he is guarded *(maḥfūẓ)*".[17]

In general, many of Abū Yazīd's concepts of mysticism are to be understood through the utterances considered as *shaṭaḥāt*.

Without understanding these, we cannot reach his ideas at all. *Shaṭaḥāt* actually seems to run contrary to conventional collective understanding, and without knowing its speaker, would be rejected out of hand. Many sayings uttered by Abū Yazīd, preserved by his disciples are of this kind. In his sayings, he seems to use God's very words, and also to claim that only God deserves.

According to Anṣārī there are three categories of *shaṭaḥāt*:[18] The first is the state in which Abū Yazīd forgets himself completely and affirms God alone. In one instance when he was asked about himself he replied that "he also is looking for Abū Yazīd". In this category too that what he said "none is in his house except God". He sometimes replied to the same question with two different answers. This is attributed to different status, one being in the state of self-forgetfulness *(fanā')* and the second in the state of living-in-God *(baqā')*.

The second category of *shaṭaḥāt* refers to Abū Yazīd's declaration of unity with God. His well-known sayings in this category are, "Glory be to me glory be to me" *(subḥānī subḥānī)*, "How great is My Majesty" (*mā a'ẓamu sha'nī*), I am My Lord the Great. I watched my heart for forty years, then I looked at myself and lo! It was the Lord and the Lord was the servant". He also said, "I am the well-preserved tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ*)". Here he

[17] Anṣārī, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

seems to declare that he has been given some extraordinary knowledge.

The third category consists of *shaṭaḥāt* is considered from the third degree of *fanā'* in which Abū Yazīd forgets both himself and the Lord and passes into complete unknowable infinitude (*ghayba*). Some of his sayings in this category are: "I am like a sea of unconsciousness *(baḥr mustalīm)* which has no beginning and no end". This means he forgets everything including his own attributes as a man. He even said, "No morning, no evening" because they both need attributes as he was without having attributes. His attributes have vanished into His *ghayb* and the *ghayb* has no attributes that can be known. All his sayings are speaking about the stages of mystical experience and certainly an ordinary man is difficult to understand them.

The *shaṭaḥāt* are the words of Abū Yazīd who spoke them out unconsciously while he was completely "forgetting himself". The "I" for him belongs only to God, because two "I"s are impossible. The oneness just returns to God alone *(waḥdat al-wujūd)* who deserves it. He "himself" is nothing, everything vanishes except God who is alive forever.

Abū Yazīd was considered a "saint" by his fellow Sufis. His expression of proximity to God can be found in his narration about going to heaven, called *mi'rāj* (ascension). According to al-Hujwīrī, this event was exactly the same that happened to the Prophet, but the different thing that the ascension of the prophet took place outwardly and in the body whereas the ascension of the saints took place inwardly, and in the spirit. When a saint is enraptured and intoxicated, he is withdrawn from himself by means of a spiritual ladder and brought near to God.[19] Abū Yazīd described it by saying, "His spirit was borne to the heavens. It looked at nothing and gave no heed, though Paradise and Hell were displayed to it, for it was freed from phenomenon and veils".[20]

Al-Sarrāj joined with al-Junayd and tried to defend Abū Yazīd's utterances, seeing nothing in them which contradicted Is-

[19] Al-Hujwīrī, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-239.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 238.

lamic teachings. It was reported that al-Sarrāj visited Abū Yazīd's village, Bisṭām, and met his family in order to clarify about the strange utterances, such as "I am God", whether they were really pronounced by Abū Yazīd or not. In this case, his family told him (al-Sarrāj) that they had never heard such words springing out of his mouth. To tell the truth that al-Sarrāj himself does not reject any *shaṭaḥāt*. This is because to deny any *shaṭaḥāt* means to deny him as being an "ascetic" as well as his asceticism.

Practically speaking many Sufis before and after him spoke *shaṭaḥāt*. For example, Al-Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah (d. 180 or 185 A.H.) expressed her love to God to the extent that she said, "I do not love the Ka'bah but the God of Ka'bah.", Yaḥyā ibn Mu'āz (d. 258 A.H.) and al-Ḥallāj, al-Junayd, Ibn 'Atā' al-Iskandarī (d. 709 A.H/1309 A.D), al-Shiblī and many others are remembered for utterances that are very controversial for some.[21]

Though al-Sarrāj had no doubts about Abū Yazīd having *shaṭaḥāt*, he stood to defend him rejecting the accusation of infidelity made by Ibn Sulaim (d. 297 A.H.). Al-Sarrāj simply said to Ibn Sulaim, "Your accusation with *kufr* to this person who is known as an escetic, worshipper, learned man and so on, is defi-

---

[21] See Ibrāhīm Basyūnī, *Nash'ah al-Taṣawwuf al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1969), pp. 246-251. The *shaṭaḥāts* of the Sufis were unacceptable whatever being bound by interpretations by them or their disciples. Their utterances of this kind invited tribulations and somehow cost them their lives because they were considered 'heretical and a danger to the State and to Islam 'as happened to al-Ḥallāj himself who said, "I am God". See al-Aṭṭās, *op. cit.*, p. 9. But according to Anwar al-Jundī, the persecution and execution of al-Ḥallāj was not concerned with his words of that kind but it came in the wake of the unveiling of his secret letter to al-Qarāmiṭah purposing to topple the Islamic state during his time (under the reign of Abbasid Caliphate, al-Muqtadir Billāh). See "al-Ḥallāj wa al-Qarāmitah", in *Manār al-Islām*, April 1985, pp. 74-75. See 'Umar Farrūkh, *al-Taṣawwuf fī al-Islām* (Beirūt: Maktabah al-Munayminah, 1947), p. 66. Abū Yazīd was also reportedly deported many times by the King from his village, Bisṭām. This was possibly due to his *(shaṭaḥāt)* that were considered dangerous to the ummah. See al-Ḥasani, *op. cit.*, p. 399.

nitely impossible".[22] For him, Abū Yazīd had a right to express his personal inner feeling when speaking of his experiences. Al-Sarrāj treated the issue in the contexts of situation, position, state and feelings that surrounded Abū Yazīd's mystical life.[23]

4. Abū Yazīd's Ideas on Sufism

As mentioned before, most of Abū Yazīd's ideas of Sufism can be understood through his *shaṭaḥāt*. As for being an ascetic Sufi Abū Yazīd is said to have a wonderful mystical experience which was narrated by both those disciples who were with him and those who visited him. There are no books available because, according to H. Ritter, he wrote nothing. However, some five hundred of his sayings were handed down by his disciples and his circle, in the first place by his elder brother's son, Abū Mūsa 'Īsa b. Adam. Al-Junayd received his original Persian sayings and translated them into Arabic.[24]

A. The Teaching of Renunciation (Zuhd)

Abū Yazīd's concept of renunciation can be understood through his practical life. He actually practised what he said. *Zuhd* has its roots in Islamic teaching through the understanding of some verses of the Qur'ān and the practical life of the Prophet and his close companions. Forms of Abū Yazīd's *zuhd* can be shared with many Sufis before and after him, particularly in terms of their attitude towards the worldly life and material things. Basically the idea of blaming the worldly life *(al-hayāt al-dunyā)* can be found literally in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*.

---

[22] Ibn Sulaim assumes that Abū Yazīd in his saying "Glory be to me Glory be to me" has acted like *Fir'aun* who said "I am the highest God" (*ana rabbukumul a'lā*) but for al-Sarrāj the word 'me' in Abū Yazīd's saying returns to God,uttered only by him, as we find in so many verses in the Qur'ān when someone reads 'I am your God just worship me'. 'Me' here surely refers to God not to the one who says that. See al-Sarrāj,*op. cit.*, p. 391.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 304.

[24] *The Encyclopeadia of Religion*, s.v. Bayazid.

One of the verses in the Qur'ān is, "...in order that you may not despair over matters that pass you by, not exult over favours bestowed upon you. For God loves not any vainglorious boaster" (Qur'ān, 57:23). And also regarding life in the world, as God says, "The worldly life *(al-ḥayāt al-dunyā)* is not a thing except deceit enjoyment *(matā'ul ghurūr)*" (Qur'ān 57:20). These simple verses from the Qur'ān are understood to encourage the Sufis to keep away from this world, and not to enjoy the happiness found in it.

Abū Yazīd's point of view about renunciation came from his all-consuming love of God. To him, renunciation and devotion are two elements of religion and religion is nothing without both. He had no belongings and offered himself to God by performing all the obligations and *Sunnah* practices. His desire was to be nearer to God, even "as near as his jugular vein" *(ḥabl al-warīd)* as stated clearly in the Qur'ān (2:16). According to al-Qushayrī, there were different views among scholars about *Zuhd*. To some, it means renunciation of the unlawful *(al-ḥarām)* because the lawful *(al-ḥalāl)* is allowed by God. When God gives a lawful property to his servant, he should worship Him by thanking Him (for that blessing); to reject it is not considered as a virtue. The rejection of *al-ḥalāl* is not a renunciation.[25]

Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) divided *zuhd* into three divisions: avoiding the unlawful *(al-ḥarām)* is the *zuhd* of the ordinary person; avoiding the virtues *(al-fuḍūl)* is the *zuhd* of the elite *(al-khawwās)*; avoiding what brings you away from God is the *zuhd* of gnostics *(al-'ārifīn)*.[26] The *zuhd* of the gnostic was undergone by Abū Yazīd and *de facto* he was known as "the Chief of Gnostics" *(sulṭān al-'ārifīn)*. This is the highest stage of Sufis as they are really sinking in the love of God. They are understood to know nothing except the Truth and the Reality *(al-ḥaqq wa al-ḥaqīqah)*. This stage of knowing nothing but the truth and reality was characterised by Ibn Sīnā (d. 428 A.H.) as "being unable to be ex-

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.*

pressed by words (*lā yumkin wasfuhu*)".[27]

It appears therefore that Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī was practicing the upper degree of *zuhd* as defined by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Sīnā. Abū Yazīd clearly rejected all offers from God saying that they all were temptations from God and all of them he considered as "deceit" *(khud'ah)*. Abū Yazīd said, "I was three days in renunciation. On the fourth day I had finished it. The first day I renounced this world, the second day I renounced the otherworld, the third day I renounced everything save God; When the fourth day came, nothing was left to me but God. I reached a desperate longing. Then I heard a voice addressing me."O Abū Yazīd, you are not strong enough to endure, with me alone. I said, "That is exactly what I want". Then the voice said, "You have found, you have found".[28]

This typical kind of *shaṭaḥāt* was spoken in a state of renunciation. After he renounced the world and everything but God, he dreamed that God warned him of something. Without this kind of *zuhd* he would have failed to win his desire to hear that voice from God. Abū Yazīd also explained that he had divorced the world three times and he would never turn back to the world again. He prayed alone and called upon God with special prayer. For him the proof God accepted his prayer was that He made him forget himself completely and he ignored all the creatures before him.[29] He rejected everything God offered to him, and was simply very pleased with God's blessings, he claimed that he had already gotten the gifts from God *(al-'aṭāyā al-ilāhiyyah)*.

The *zuhd* to which he had committed himself was a real *zuhd*,

---

[27] Ibn Sīnā talked about the three stages of Sufis.*Al-zāhid* (escetic), *'ābid* (worsipper), and *al-'ārif* (gnostic). For him to reach the stage of gnostic a Sufi should pass through the renunciated and worshipping stages. See Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt,* sharḥ al-Rāzī wa al-Ṭūsī, Vol. 2 (Cairo: Matba'ah al-Khayriyyah, 1325), p. 104. See: Abdul Ḥalīm Maḥmūd,*al-Tafkīr al-Falsafī fī al-Islām* (Beirūt: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1982), p. 409.

[28] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 48

[29] Al-Iṣfahānī, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

because he did it from his own choice, without being forced. Renunciation is for the sake of renunciation which means that he felt very closely to God. Accordingly, he must love and worship Him by his heart and body. Thus Abū Yazīd was said to have never forgotten a *dhikr* of God in his entire life. He always reportedly led prayer at the mosque.

B. The Teaching of Intoxication *(Sukr)*

Abū Yazīd's doctrine is of rapture (*ghalabat*) and intoxication (*sukr*). He said that a rapturous longing intoxication of love cannot be acquired by human beings, and it is idle to claim and absurd to imitate anything that lies beyond the range of acquisition. Abū Yazīd and his disciples preferred intoxication to sobriety because intoxication involves the destruction of human attributes. Sobriety only "involves the fixity and equilibrium of human attributes, which are the greatest veil between God and man".[30] Abū Yazīd wants here to approach closely to God and to have chosen the approach of intoxication in order to destroy all his human attributes, which he felt had become a veil between him and God. He did not feel any danger in his action, and he forgot everything even himself. "Intoxication is not an attribute of the sober, and an intoxicated man is unable to draw it to himself. He is enraptured and pays no heed to created things, that he should manifest any quality involving conscious effort (*taklīf*)".[31] Therefore, the creatures have nothing to do with the intoxicated who sinks into the ocean *(baḥr)* of loving God. Their bussiness is only with God and with the truth *(al-ḥaqq)* and reality (*al-ḥaqīqah*). Al-Hujwīrī does not see that intoxication and rapture cannot be induced by self-mortification (*mujāhadāt al-nafs)*. Intoxication is like foresight and choice, and the annihilation of man's control in God. Those faculties therefore survive in him that do not belong to the human genus; and they are the most complete and perfect.[32]

---

[30] Al-Hujwīrī, *op. cit.*, p. 185

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 184.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 185.

Abū Yazīd, however, tried to relate his action to the Prophet David *(Dāwud),* who did "an action" of killing. Abū Yazīd saw that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did that in a state of intoxication, according to the Qur'an, "You did not throw, when you threw, but God threw". (Qur'ān: 8:17). But God also says "...David killed Goliath *(Jālūt)*"(Qur'ān: 2:251). Thus Abū Yazīd held that David really killed Goliath by his hand, but in a state of forgetting himself. Abū Yazīd wanted here to explain that his intoxication had its root in the Qur'ān. He was consistent in his attitude; his followers were going to defend his intoxication. To a letter sent to him by Yaḥyā bin Mu'ādh (d. 258 A.H.), Abū Yazīd replied that an intoxicated man would drink all the ocean with the fullness of the wine of love, and even there he would still cry for more to slake his thirst.[33]

According to al-Hujwīrī, there were two kinds of intoxication: with the wine of affection *(mawaddah)*, and with the cup of love *(maḥabbah)*. The *mawaddah* and *maḥabbah* are Qur'ānic terms used by Abū Yazīd as a manifestation of a very close relation to God. He, indeed, loves God, and God loves him. The wine itself is a symbol of happiness and even though he drinks many cups of wine he is still feeling thirsty. The relation with God is forever and endless. Abū Yazīd was mindful of God all the time, even reportedly, not sleeping for the sake of remembering God *(dhikr)*.

Al-Junayd opposed the concept of intoxication held by Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī because for him intoxication is an evil. It involves the disturbance of one's normal state and loss of sanity and self-control; and inasmuch as the principle of all things is sought either by way of annihilation or subsistence, or of effacement or affirmation, the principle of verification cannot be attained unless the seeker is sane".[34] This is to say that al-Junayd is concerned about the state of sanity of a man, and surely loss of sanity is not a practical way, especially in terms of sharing a social life and activities. He preferred sobriety as being more acceptable to the people. As the "chosen people" (*al-khawwās*) whether intoxicated or sober,

---

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 187.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 185.

they do not absent themselves from sharing the concerns of their community. Lastly, the sober Sufis look to have more "acceptable" personalities in order to deal with the social orders, whereas to the intoxicated Sufis, the orders and the laws become invalid. They are just busy with themselves.

C. The Doctrine of Annihilation *(al-Fanā')*

The state of *fanā'* comes after the state of intoxication. *Fanā'* or the passing away of consciousness in mystical union, was taught first by Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī. But many see that annihilation has its roots in the foreign sources of Islam such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. However, according to Muṣṭafā Ḥilmī in his book, *al-Ḥayāt al-Rūḥiyyah fī al-Islām* , the Prophet himself experienced the passing away of his consciousness when he was talking to his wife, 'Āisha, who wordlessly reacted to the prophet's question, recognizing that the Prophet was not in his usual condition.[35]

Al-Junayd asserted that *'shaṭḥ'* is primarily an annihilation. "The mystic experiences no feelings towards anything, and loses all sense of discrimination. He passes away from all things, and he is wholly absorbed with that through which he passed away".[36] In such a state, it was held that there was no sin any more because mystic was divinely protected by God from all opposition to Him or from all personal interests. That state was in the fullness of obedience and allegiance to God. The mystic forgot every thing and is directly controlled by God. A Sufi in this condition as said by Abū Yazīd, did not care whether he saw a woman or a wall. "The passing away of a servant's will in the will of God, but no passing away of a servant existence in God's existence. That is exactly like as the fire burning the iron and being able to influence its character but without touching its essence or changing it".[37]

[35] Cf. Basyūnī, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

[36] Arthur John Arberry, *The Doctrine of The Sufis (of Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhi)* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1966), p. 131.

[37] Basyūnī, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

According to al-Aṭṭār (d. 616 A.H), the words uttered by Abū Yazīd who had been passing away into God (in self-annihilation), had been really spoken by God Himself, not Abū Yazīd.[38] The "I" refers to God, not to Abū Yazīd. It does mean here that he wanted to be in the position of God, but rather recognized the oneness of God and simultaneously denied the existence of himself.

According to Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas that "the extinction in God" does not mean that one is absorbed into the other, like a lump of salt into the ocean. There is no intervening space between the one and the others, nor are there two separate entities becoming one - or a duality - becoming a unity. There was, is, and will continue to be, only one. In other words, Sufis "have identified the 'one' to be none other than what mind, dictated by habit patterns derived from environment and experience, chop up, to become the "many". *Fanā'*, then, does not mean self destruction nor self-absorption, but self-illumination".[39] *Fanā'* as self-annihilation is an upper grade of sprituality and it is not easy to reach that grade. The Sufis will have passed through a number of conditions before they can attain that self-illumination.

Al-Attas further explains that when the Sufis say that the 'one' is identified with the many, it must be borne in mind that by identity - the condition of being the same - they do not conceive two separate entities existing per se. Such a conception would inevitably imply the existence per se of an infinite space in which God and the whole of His creation is other than Himself. One is also forced to admit that there was a time when His creation did not exist, as though 'past','present' and 'future' is applicable even to God. Consequently such a conception would be beset by philosophical thorns, for one would be forced further to admit not two, but four separate entities existing by themselves: matter, space, time and God who, although their creator, is yet dependent upon them, which is absurd. By 'identity', therefore, the Sufis mean 'realization' of a truth, which has always been, and always will con-

[38] Ronald Grisell, *Sufism* (Calif: Ross Books, 1983), p. 60.

[39] Al-Attas, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

tinue to be one and the same, independent of what a mind conceives as distinct.[40]

D. His Views on the Issue of Miracles *(Karāmāt)*

Abū Yazīd also took part in the discussion of miracles *(karāmāt)* that engaged so many Sufis. According to al-Hujwīrī, "Miracles may be vouchsafed to a saint *(waliy)* so long as he does not infringe the obligations of the religious law. A miracle is a token of the saint's veracity, and it cannot be manifested to an impostor except as a sign that his pretensions are false".[41] There is a great difference between *karāmāt* (miracles) and *mu'jizāt* (evidentiary miracles) even though they appear as proofs of the power of God to His Saints *(al-awliyā')* and to His Prophets. Al-Hujwīrī further explains that Abū Yazīd and others like Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, al-Ḥallāj, Yaḥyā al-Rāzī and so on, hold that miracles happen to the Sufis when they are in the state of intoxication but to the Prophets (*mu'jizāt)* when they are in the state of sobriety. The Sufi does not call the people to follow him by showing these miracles but the Prophets with their miracles will challenge the people to rival what they have done.[42] Although Abū Yazīd underwent intoxication, he did not claim having any miracles, his intent was to explain issue in order to be careful of such claims.

Al-Sarrāj in his book, *al- Luma'*, in the chapter entitled "The Mentioning of the Degrees of the Spiritual Members in Miracles and People Whose Miracles Have Appeared to Him and the Fear of Tempting *(Fitnah)*" mentions the position of Abū Yazīd with regard to this issue. Abū Yazīd seems to be very careful when receiving any claim of having miracles and even though he did not reject the idea, he does warn people to reject impostors' claims. For him, claims such as a man 'being able to fly in the air', did not surprise him either. He simply said that even the birds who did not

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[41] Al-Hujwīrī, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 226.

believe in God could do that.[43] He always referred all discussion of such matters to the importance of having a good relationship with God by obeying His commandments and having loyalty to the *Sharī'a* Law in the sense that the personality is very important to be taken into account.

This issue is very important because the claim of working miracles has been common in Muslim communities even to the present time. Many followers of certain Sufis paths will tend to claim their masters having miracles, ask the people to believe in them and follow their paths accordingly. They even, claim that their masters can harm their opponents. From Abū Yazīd's point of view, a miracle which took place is not a token for a saint to manipulate the people with that. This is perhaps a matter of God's special gift to His pious servants. So we have to be careful in accepting any claim of having miracle by one among us.

VI. Source of Abū Yazīd's Mysticism

One controversial issue surrounds Abū Yazīd's doctrine of *fanā'* (self-annihilation). Many writers simply attribute the teaching of Abū Yazīd and the other Sufi to the "foreign influences" that apparently had similar concepts of inner practices. Others try to suggest that he originated this doctrine. However, according to Nicholson, Abū Yazīd might have derived this doctrine from his teacher, Abū 'Alī al-Sindī.[44]

The issue of Abū 'Alī al-Sindī has been argued by several scholars. Max Horten argues that Abū 'Alī, was an Indian. Nicholson accepted this idea. The Indian origin of Abū 'Alī however was rejected by A.J Arberry, who said that the term 'Sindi' may refer to a village called 'Sind' in Khurasan recorded by the geographer, Yāqūt.[45] To tell the truth, that Abū 'Alī was a convert to Islam from another religion. Abū Yazīd said of him, "I used to

[43] Al-Sarrāj, *op. cit.*, pp. 324-325.

[44] Cf. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (London: University of London, 1960), p. 93.

[45] *Ibid.*

keep company with Abū 'Alī al-Sindī and I used to show him how to perform the obligatory duties of Islām, and in exchange he would give me instruction in the divine unity *(tawḥīd)* and the ultimate truths *(ḥaqā'iq).*"

Abū Yazīd, then, represents himself as learning the 'ultimate truth' about the divine unity from a man who did not even know how to perform the obligatory duties of a Muslim. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that al-Sindī was a convert from another faith.[46]

According to Arberry, the phrase (of Arabic Text)[47] translated by Zaehner as "I used to show him how to perform the obligatory duties of Islām" has been translated by H. Ritter as meaning that Abū Yazīd had to teach Abū 'Alī the Qur'ānic verses necessary for prayer. This interpretation was doubtless influenced by the brief mention of Abū 'Alī in unpublished work of Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, given by Jāmī in *Nafaḥāt al-Uns*. This reference was seemingly overlooked by Zaehner. Arberry argues that it is presumptuous to state that Abū 'Alī was a convert from another religion. This is because the statements of Abū Yazīd show that he instructed Abū 'Alī in the exegesis of ṣūrah 1 *(al-fatīḥah)* and ṣūrah 62 *(al-Jum'ah)* of the Qur'ān. It is interesting in view of what Abū 'Alī is said to have taught Abū Yazīd in return to remember that ṣūrah 62 (which is sometime known as ṣūrah *al-Tawḥīd*).[48]

On the other hand, Abū Yazīd was also said to be influenced by the Upanishads introduced by Al-Sindī. The former seems to use the words and concepts used in Upanishads. For example, the famous "Thou art that" has its counterpart in a saying of Abū Yazīd:

> *Once God raised me up and placed me before Him and said to me: O Abū Yazīd! verily My creatures long to see*

[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

[47] *Waqāla Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī raḥimahullāh: Ṣaḥibtu Abā 'Alī al-Sindī, fakuntu ulaqqinuhu mā yuqīmu bihi farḍahu, wakāna yu'allimunī al-tawḥīda wa al-haqā'iqa sarifan.*

[48] A.J. Arberry, *"Bistamiana"*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, vol. XXV (London, University of London, 1962), p. 36.

thee. And I said: 'Adorn me with Thy oneness, so that when Thy creatures see me, they may say: 'We have seen Thee' (i.e., God) and Thou art that (fa takūnu anta zākā), Yet I (Abū Yazīd) will not be there at all (wa lā akūnu ana hunāka).[49]

"Thou art that" was considered by Zaehner to be a proof of the great influence of the Upanishads on Abū Yazīd, allowing him to distinguish between the "empirical self" of man and his "real self", and also between atman and Brahman. But al-Junayd defended Abū Yazīd by saying that the statement refers to his closeness to God, pointing out that in one of the Traditions, the Prophet when he wanted to pray said, "I stood up before God" (*bayna yaday al-Malik al-Jabbār*). On another occasion the Prophet said, "My servant ceases not to draw nigh unto Me by works of devotion until I love him, and when I love him, I am the eye by which he sees and the ear by which he hears, etc."[50]

According to Anṣārī the view that the above-mentioned words come from the Upanishads is not quite correct because the "Thou" in Abū Yazīd's statement refers to God and not to Abū Yazīd. However, 'Thou' in the Upanishads refers to the reality underlying the world. The Upanishads distinguish between the empirical self of man and his real self; and they also distinguished between atman or Brahman which is the essence of the world or between God. Such distinctions, however, are not visible in Abū Yazīd and, therefore, it is not true to say that Abū Yazīd is influenced by the Upanishads. But the question should be raised is whether the words of both Upanishads and Abū Yazīd convey the same message.[51] We argue that similarities in words alone are not proofs to say that the latter was influenced by these sources.

The other issue regarding the influence of Hinduism upon Abū Yazīd's ideas and practices is the word "deceit" *(khud'ah):*

As soon as I reached (God's) Unity I became a bird whose

---

[49] Al-Sarrāj, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 102.

[51] Anṣārī, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

body was oneness and whose wings were of everlastingness; and I went on flying in the atmosphere of relativity for ten years until I entered into an atmosphere a hundred million times as large; and I am on flying until I reached the expanse of eternity and in it I saw there the tree of Oneness". (Then (says al-Sarrāj), he described the soil (in which it grew, its root and branch, its shoots and fruits, and then he said) Then I looked, and I knew that all this was deceit.[52]

In this context Zaehner tries to relate the word 'deceit' *(khud'ah)* with the theory of *Maya* in the Upanishads. For Abū Yazīd, the whole empirical world is an illusion. He claimed to have refused many offers of the world given by God as a temptation to him because God also warned him not to take these offers, as they were all deceptions. Otherwise God offered him His divine favours *('aṭāyā ilāhiyyah)*.[53]

According to Anṣārī, Zaehner has misunderstood the words used by Abū Yazīd. That is to say that Anṣārī did not agree with the idea of an Hinduism - influenced Abū Yazīd. Al-Junayd as well defended Abū Yazīd saying that the latter had his own ideas and practices which are not contradictory to the Islamic teachings as far as the verses of the Qur'ān and the Traditions are concerned.

VI. Conclusion

Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī emerged as one of the most eminent Sufis in Islamic history. He was among the Sufis who was regarded by al-Junayd as Gabriel among the angels. No one can deny his contribution to Sufism. His *shaṭaḥāts* became dominant in his Sufi ideas. Al-Sarrāj and al-Junayd wrote in his favour, defending his sayings by regarding him as a scholar who has a right to understand Islamic teaching in that way. For them, all of his ideas and practices were inherent from Islam itself.

---

[52] Translated from Arabic by R.A. Nicholson, see: Bistamiana, *op. cit.*, p. 28 and Anṣārī, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

[53] Zaehner, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

De facto, the later Sufis, such as al-Junayd, al-Ḥallāj, al-Rūmī and al-'Aṭṭār regarded him as their master. Thus their ideas and practices have roots in Abū Yazīd's ideas and practices. Abū Yazīd was respected as well as the chief of gnostics *(sulṭān al-'ārifīn).*

I think it is very difficult to judge or even to evaluate, the ideas and practices of Abū Yazīd by modern standards, particularly his practices of *fanā* (annihilation), *sukr* (intoxication) and *zuhd* (renunciation). All of these practices were fruits of absolute longing for and love of God. The world for those who practiced them was nothing except a field *(mazra'ah)* for the sake of the day of judgement *(yawm al-qiyāmah).*

It is really difficult to understand the Sufis' *shaṭaḥāt* because the languages they spoke were derived from mystical experience. That was the world of inner experience and not being easy for any one to get in it. Abū Yazīd bequeathed the valuable ideas of a mystic to be appreciated even in modern times because Sufism is still currently popular, particularly in western scholarship. Possibly many of his ideas will be interpreted broadly in order to promote the spiritual essence in the face of the challenges of materialism. It is not easy for ordinary Muslims to attain the gnostic stage in these modern materialistic times. Yet tendencies toward Sufism are probably going to be found in many communities. People, have become conscious of their soul-dimension and fear that failure to fulfill this dimension will corrupt the stability of personal and social life. A merely material improvement cannot guarantee their survival. Finally, I think that the positive aspects of the ancient Sufi teachings can be introduced and reformed in the light of modern times. Many of their ideas and practices were probably related to the circumstances surrounding them at that time, but, studies of Sufism cannot neglect their contribution, precisely because present-day Islamic Sufism has been built on these foundations.